

Biohazard

by SheegothBait

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Summary: It is the beginning of the Forerunner-Human wars. The humans have been attacking Forerunner planets, seemingly without cause. A human vessel is captured by the Forerunner fleets, but the lone survivor is unknowingly sick with a terrible disease that they have never encountered before. Can they stop it? Rating has been changed due to scenes of intense violence. I do not own Halo

1. Enemy Seen and Unseen

What is left of my sanity is going. I don't know if the infection I carried in human form still resides, but I have not talked to anyone in years. Maybe the decision of conversion was a terrible mistake. But someone has to know. Take the last of my memories, Reclaimer, and be warned: It _is coming. It will devour. It spares none. _Warn _the Forerunners. They _must _know. They have not heard me. It is too late for me. You must tell them. They are the only ones who can stop it._

****High orbit, Urdan, Forerunner Colony world****

The screech of alarms continues as the ship shudders to a halt, its engines disabled by suppressors. We have prepared, but even we cannot stop the advances of the Warrior-Servants. Now that they've disabled our engines, we are in serious trouble. Their boarding parties have docked, and the computer's ancilla keeps reminding me that there are multiple hull breaches. We came here to find a suitable place to settle, but they must have anticipated our move, because they were waiting for us when we dropped out of Slipspace with a small battle group in tow. The instant we rematerialized, they hit us with a particle beam, disabling our ship's defenses. Then they activated their suppressors, leaving us helpless, drifting.

Now, the high-pitched shriek of lightrifle bolts echoes down the hall as the Prometheans in full battle armor advance. I line up my sights, pull the trigger repeatedly until one falls. I do not stop to watch.

My sights are already on another, and that one too, is falling. But they are too numerous. Where one topples, there are two more to take its place. We are being overrun. This reminds me—I shake the memory. It is horrifying, and I don't want to relive it, especially now, when the memory could kill me.

Holding this part of the ship is useless.

"Fall back!" I shout. "Fall back!"

My soldiers, loyal troops, obey, making for the hatchway, exposing themselves in the hopes of escape. A few fall under the Forerunners' combined fire with pained cries, but we must leave them. We do not have time to go back for the fallen. My heart breaks for them. To survive all this way, only to be put down at the hands of our old allies? It doesn't seem fair.

"Seal the door!" I shout at the man nearest the controls. He mashes his hand against the contact until the door closes with a solid boom.

"What now, sir? We're spent. We can't continue to fight."

A hissing noise distracts me. They are cutting their way through. I do a quick head count. Five men, no more. My stomach seems to shrink to the size of a raisin. We are doomed. They will kill us. There is no surrender to them, merciless bastards that they are.

"Final stand. We're going down, but not without a fight. We're going to kill as many of them as we can. Leave no one alive!"

There is a chorus of "Ayes" from my men.

"Take up defensive positions."

The men scatter, erecting hasty barricades out of anything they can get their hands on. The result is a circular ragtag of battle debris in the middle of the command center, behind which we hide, hunkering down, preparing for the worst. The men feed their weapons the last of the ammo, their faces grim. They know what will happen next. They have heard the last distress messages from other ships caught by Forerunner patrols, but no live stories, and for good reason.

The door we are focused on glows orange, then disintegrates in a flash of blinding light. The Prometheans pour through the new gap, and we rain death upon them. Some fall, but they will not be stopped. Like a juggernaut, they roll forward, spreading out. The stench of blood, both ours and Forerunners, overwhelms the filters in my helmet. I give an agonized cry as a lightrifle bolt pierces my armor, boring a shallow groove in my side and exposing bone. Several of the Warrior-Servants are using scatter-shots, and the energy projectiles whistle around us. I duck below the barrier and only then realize that the man beside me is dead, sprawled on his back, blood leaking from multiple punctures in his chest. A red haze of fury seems to drop over my eyes as a burning anger for the dead man consumes me. I straighten, firing my weapon into the pressing mass. A second bolt sears through my shoulder, and I fall backward, dropping my rifle. I roll over and drag myself to my feet as the Promethean's commander issues orders, surrounding what used to be my barricade, taking charge and stock of the dead.

Something whizzes past my ear. A lightrifle bolt, blue instead of their usual orange. My mind knows there is some significance to this, but cannot recall what it is. The pain is making it hard to think, and it is an effort just to keep moving.

An impact causes me to stumble, and searing pain burns for a second along my limbs. Then all consciousness flees, and I black out.

2. Lost Ones

_Wake. _

I open my eyes and blink groggily up. An odd, soft glow surrounds me, though a shadow from above and behind partially blocks that light. I'm lying on my back, cradled by soft cushions. Floating almost, it seems.

This startles me out of my stupor, and I try to sit up. Bands of hard-light around me hold me down, constraining my movements. They must have hit me with a stun shot, hence the reason I am not dead right now. My reactions are slow and numb, and I realize that they must have given me medication, probably a painkiller and a sedative. I groan wearily and slump back, weak and sleepy. _Captured._ I am a Forerunner prisoner of war, the only one alive out of a crew of nearly four hundred. I begin to wonder if dying would have been better.

A helmeted face appears above me, the contours unpleasantly familiar. I have fought and killed many like these over the last few days, though the exact style and its designation eludes me. I struggle against my restraints, desperate to get away. The Forerunner puts a six-fingered hand on my forehead and speaks to me in a low, soothing voice.

"Lie still, human. You're hurt and in need of healing. My name is Shadow-Before-Longest-Dawn, though most just call me Shadow. I am a Lifeworker, that is, doctor in your professions. You need not fear while you are with me. No harm will come to you."

"Whyâ€|Why am I restrained?"

"That is of little concern. Right now, you just need to rest." The Forerunner motions with his hand, and a small monitor floats over. "Sleep is the best thing for you right now."

The monitor extends a slim, silvery needle. I try to get away again, but there is no escape. The needle pricks my skin, injecting its contents into me. I begin to feel woozy and try to fight the drug, but am already weakened from the previous dose.

"Relax. You're going to be fine." The Forerunner says, attempting to reassure me. I clutch desperately at the last vestiges of consciousness, but it's of no use. A tidal wave of soft, silent black rolls over me. I sink under its weight and keep falling forever.

When I wake up again, the Lifeworker is speaking, but not to me. I recognize the deeper tones of Warrior-Servant. Chills shoot through

me. I _know_ that voice. It is not just any Promethean, it is _the_ Promethean, the prime foe of humans, the Didact himself. No one has ever seen him in person and lived. From the tone of their voices, they are not happy with each other, and as I listen to them, I realize they are talking about me.

"Why have you not killed him?"

"There has to be a reason for the humans to be doing this. Allow me to question him before you make a verdict on this one's life."

"I was quite clear with my instructions: leave no one alive. _Why_ is he still breathing?_ And _why_ _have_ you disobeyed orders?"

"Didact, please. You must understand our motivation. They have never tried to do this before, and from what we know of them, they would not attack us without due cause. We need to question one to find out why they are burning our colonies."

"My children have died for this! _Died_ _for_ the right to continue to live! _Died_ because these _humans,"_ he made the word sound like an insult, "have taken the Mantle into their own hands! Their actions demand punishment! They must suffer the consequences!"

"Didact, we know of your recent loss and we sorrow for you. But you must contain your anger. Killing him serves us nothing but temporary vindication for his actions. At the very least, use him for information before he is executed, or else is there no reason for us bringing him here."

I watch through cracked eyelids the Didact's reaction to this. He goes very still for a moment, then seizes a hovering monitor in his six-fingered fist and throws it across the room like a human pitching a ball. It smashes against the far wall, its light shattering.

"Didactâ€|"

"What know you of grief?" His voice has gone from thunderous to broken, cracked like the monitor's eye. His shoulders have hunched in on themselves, drawing his cloak about him protectively, his head hanging, his hands gripping a railing so tightly it bends under his grasp. "You have not lostâ€|not like I haveâ€|"

The Lifeworker reaches out to touch his shoulder, but he jerks away. "Leave me be. I do not want your sympathy." He draws a deep, shuddering breath, composes himself. "Keep him if you will. I do not care. I don't want to see him ever again."

"Didact, we desire your councilâ€|"

"You need not have my council." The Promethean responds bitterly. "You have taken a prisoner without my consent, and you will deal with him as you see fit. However, should he get out of hand, I will hold you _personally_ _responsible."

He straightens, turns, and strides out without another word, his cloak billowing behind him like windblown smoke. Shadow, my Forerunner guardian, is very still for a moment, seemingly worried, then hurries out of my vision range.

The hard-light bands around me still hold me fast, and I squirm on the bed a little before realizing that they are inescapable. Eventually I go still, staring up at the ceiling and thinking about what I heard. So the hard-hearted Promethean had children and lost them to the warâ€¦ Maybe they are more like us than we thoughtâ€¦

I am tired from the residual effects of the medication and from the effort my body has expended to heal my wounds. I close my eyes, but it is a while before I fall asleep, thoughts spiraling through my brain. My interminable dreams are full of Forerunners and humans, mourning over their fallen loved ones.

3. Carrier

A sharp pain wakes me and I open my eyes to see a monitor hovering over me, withdrawing a silvery needle stained with my blood. I attempt to raise a hand to swipe at the bothering machine, but am still restrained.

"Ow! Heyâ€¦"

The monitor chirps something in its pleasantly synthesized voice, and I stop my complaining to listen.

"â€¦Gene sample procured. Please stand by." The monitor pauses, its internal light flickering. "Warning. Foreign genetic material detected. Biohazard containment measures activated." The monitor zips away, presumably to tell the Forerunner of this new complication.

_Biohazard?, _I think, confused. _Whatâ€¦? Oh no. No, no, no, no, no, no, no. I'm carrying _it. A pall of despair settles around me. I want to scream, but my throat has swollen shut in fear. Those diagnosed with what we call the Shaping Sickness are as good as dead. It's like being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, only it moves much, much faster, and it's contagious.

And now I have it. God only knows how I got it. It could have been anything: a sick crewmate, contaminated food source, spores inhaled directly. Though it is strange to me: I have carried the gene seeds for over sixteen hours and still no sign of the change has manifested. Maybe it's because I have been asleep for most of that time. _Or maybe, _says a nasty voice in my head, _it's a slower infection strain. _ Either way, the monitor is right: I am sick, contagious, and that means only one thing: I and anyone who has any contact with me are dead. They and Iâ€¦must be killedâ€¦and our bodies burnedâ€¦so that the infection does not spread. Forcing myself to think this way is hard, but this is the only way to stop the infection. Without the cure on hand, I will die one way or another, and it is better to go quickly and cleanly than having to face the excruciating pain of the mutations and the eventual form that will attempt to spread the sickness. I have to stop this before it gets out of hand. Where is my Forerunner guardian? I must tell him. I must tell _someone_.

As if summoned by my desperate patterns of thought, a shadow falls over me. I look to the side. It is the Forerunner, his monitor floating behind.

"Human," he says, pity resonating through his every syllable, "My monitor tells me that you are ill. What is wrong?"

"Kill me quickly." I beg him. "Please."

The Forerunner is taken aback by this. "Whatever is wrong? Surely it is not so severe that we cannot cure it. Why do you beg for death?"

I close my eyes. A slow, feverish burn like molten lead has crept into my bones. It has begun. "You don't understand. The Shaping Sicknessâ€¦I am a carrier for it. Kill me, or others will be infected." As I speak these words, I remember something: The cool touch of the alien's hand on my forehead, and then laterâ€¦I try to sit up again, panicked.

"Who else did you touch?"

"What?"

"The Didact! Did you touch him? How many others have you touched?"

"No, I didn't have any contact with the Didact. Why are you asking, and how do you know he was here?"

"I was awake. I saw him. He was here. He wanted me dead."

"What is the meaning of this?" The Forerunner is now positively alarmed.

Wearied by despair, my head slumps back. "The Shaping Sickness spreads through physical contact. You and anyone you touched now have it. The disease is a death sentence." My voice breaks as I remember good men, close families and children, huddled together in death, some partially changed. Burning. The pile of bodies sends thick clouds of greasy black smoke into the dawn sky. The memory is as clear as the day I gained it, and tears pool in the corners of my eyes like they did those many years ago, before we found a cure.

"There now," Shadow coos, reaching out to me.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" I scream, shrinking away. He is a carrier as well, but the more infected one has contact with, the faster the infection will spread. They don't understand this. Why don't they listen?

"We'll find a cureâ€¦."

"You don't get it, do you!?" Inexplicable rage flares up within me. _Another symptom, _reminds the saner bit of me. "It took us _years _to come up with a cure! _Years! _You destroyed it with your counter-attack, along with almost all the data on the Shaping Sickness! The cure we had is _gone _now! _Gone _because of _you!_"

The Forerunner steps back, wary of me as I strain at my unbreakable bonds. The monitor, though, darts forward. I feel a quick prick on

the bare skin of my shoulder, and my rage settles. I stop struggling.

"Slow down and tell me what is going on," Shadow demands. I have never heard him use this tone with me in the time I have been his captive. This is the cool, collected exterior of the Forerunner coming away piece by piece, exposing something feral and dangerous. His patience with me is not gone, not yet, but once it does go, it would be better for me to be far away.

"If I may," the monitor interrupts. The Forerunner nods curtly to it, and it moves forward, hovering directly over my chest. A beam of bluish light shoots out of it and sweeps over me, and the monitor begins to talk.

"According to my scans, subject's body composition is rapidly degenerating. Foreign genetic material detected in five percent of body tissue, and that number is rising fast."

"When will the infection take over?"

"Four days. Genetic sample shows extremely virulent properties of intrusive DNA structure. Containment measures must be taken if infection is to be quarantined." The monitor zooms backward and scans its creator as well. "Warning," it chirps, "foreign DNA detected. Infection rate at point three nine percent and climbing. Biohazard containment level five is advised."

Shadow stiffens. "I have it too? You're sure?"

"I am. Ninety-nine point eight-five-seven percent sure, in fact. Apparently the infection is spread by touch."

If the Forerunner had his helmet off, I am sure he would have gone very pale. He spreads his fingers before his visor, apparently contemplating the facts. Finally he looks back at me.

"Tell me everything," he says, and I begin my nightmarish tale.

4. The Virus

****Note: The summary of the original infection is taken from Greg Bear's Halo: Cryptum.****

(It is a must read for Halo fanatics! :))

"It started with the arrival of the ships: massive, ancient carriers filled with strange glass tubes of a mysterious dust. We were wary of the dust at first, and with good reason: the dust could have been anything, including a deadly bioweapon. Turns out it was, only not directly. It had a pleasurable effect on the species called Pheru, causing them to be easier to domesticate and more affectionate towards humans.

We began to breed them, and then things went bad. The creatures, originally herbivores, started to eat each other as weird mutations manifested. It spread quickly, but containment ordered the infected specimens be destroyed. It could have been stopped there, maybe, if we didn't also use the animals as food. Somewhere along the line,

someone ate an infected Pheru, and the disease jumped from Pheru to humans. The infection was localized at first, but it spread quickly. The symptoms were uncontrollable aggression, followed by sickening mutations. By the time we realized what had happened, over two hundred thousand had been infected. We tried everything we knew to cure it, but it became clear this was no ordinary disease. Those infected could not be reasoned with, as though they had gone mad, and when we attempted a quarantine, they simply broke through it. Weâ€|were forced to kill themâ€|and burn their corpses to stop it from spreading. Every time we thought we'd suppressed it, it would pop up again, sometimes growing almost out of control before we stopped it. Eventually we started destroying whole sections by fire, bombarding the planet from orbit. But there was always that seed that would get away and spread its infection elsewhere. It was unstoppable."

"Terrified of what would happen should we stay, we began launching carriers into space. Searching for uninhabited worlds, we took to the stars, fleeing the virus. But such worlds were nowhere to be found. What was more, our scans revealed the infection had reached some of your worlds as well. Fearing that to alert you would further spread the virus, we took the only clear optionâ€|and sterilized infected cities from orbit. We wish there was some way we could have explained first, but we were afraid the infected would get away. The symptoms do not manifest until a quarter way through, and by then it's too late. Just one contaminated cell multiplies exponentially on living flesh."

The Forerunner bows his head. "So even though there are no obvious signs, the disease can still be transmitted."

"Yes. It was how the infection spread so quickly. "

"Then this city must be immolated as well."

"Why? _How many did you touch?_"

"Iâ€|lost count, but my guess is 34."

I close my eyes. The Shaping Sickness is a death sentence. If each of these thirty-four touches just three others, then the infection will very quickly consume the city.

My belly suddenly burns with hunger, a deep, insatiable greed. This is immediately followed by a ripping pain, as though I am being torn in half. I cry out, my eyes unfocusing for a second. When I snap back to reality, I am drenched in cold sweat.

"Please, you need to find a way to preserve my memories. I'm one of the only sources you have, and there isn't much time. I can feel themâ€|"

It's as though something slimy and ravenous is slowly eating into my mind. The touch of the thing inside my head is rough and cold, like a merse's scaled wet foot wrapped around my brain, squeezing with long, sharp talons. I try to escape, but there's nowhere to hide.

"I can do that, but it's never been done with a still-living creature, let alone a human. This is highly unorthodox."

"We're not the real threat! Listen to me! You have to lock this place down. Don't let anyone get out! I need to tell them."

"Very well. I will make plans for your transference immediately. I must warn you though: this is going to hurt."

"I don't care." My teeth are clenched against the burning pain, my back arched. "Do it."

5. Unlikely ally

**Sorry about the wait. I hate writer's block. Thank you fans for your patience and continued support. **

At first I think I had died. There was sharp pain and then nothing for a long, long time. It may have been years or only hours. I can't tell. It was like my body had gone into a coma and I had come out of it some timeless while later. The time passed is impossible to discern from anything, and my vision is smeared like a two-year old finger-drawing with oil paints. Everything is just a dark blur.

Immediately I feel something is wrong. It isn't just my vision either. I can't feel my body. It is as though someone had cut my spinal cord, causing instant and total paralysis. Had the Forerunner accidentally screwed up my transference? I want to panic, but my emotions are almost as unresponsive as my body. I feel nothing. The last reaction left to me is logic, but nothing makes sense. It is like gasping for air while swimming, only to have your lungs flood with water. I feel as though I am suffocating, drowning, and there is no way to get to the surface of the invisible ocean.

I do not know how long I try to fight the invisible undertow, but my strength at long last gives out. Just as it seems my mind is about to snap, things suddenly came back into focus, as clear and crisp as a close-up photograph.

I am alone in a darkened Forerunner structure. I can tell it is Forerunner because of its fantastic shape and size. Surely no human made anything like this, with its flowing light designs as intricate as any artwork. Once again I marvel at Forerunner ingenuity and how their architects were able to seamlessly combine both form and functionality into an almost art-like whole. It is as though I have never noticed it before. I know that it is very different, however, from the place I have left. Did they warp me here after they had finished the transference? Am I locked in a Forerunner prison? Where is my monitor that they promised me?

I try to move, and to my surprise, I can. I still have total control over my body, despite not being able to feel anything. Cautiously I make for what I think is a door. It must be motion-sensitive, because it opens as I near it. No joy stirs inside me as I realize I am not locked in. I told them I was dangerous. Why didn't they heed my warning?

Slowly I walk into the hallway. It too, is darkened, silent. I seem to be moving strangely silently. If I was infected, wouldn't I have heavier footfalls? Wouldn't I be driven by base instincts instead of this seemingly solid core of logic? And where have all the

Forerunners gone? How long have I been out? I try to catch a glimpse of myself in one of the walls, but they, while silver-grey, are not reflective enough to show even a distorted image. So I keep moving, searching for answers. All I find is more silence, more of the almost-eerie hush found inside empty Forerunner constructs.

I wander through soaring arches into huge halls, all silent and motionless except for the ever-present light-art flowing continually up the walls. I feel as though I have not wandered into a random structure but a temple, and begin to understand why our ancestors once believed them gods. There is a sort of awesome majesty to them that makes me wonder how a race that made something so beautiful could make something as destructive as a war-sphinx.

A sudden noise startles me and I turn. As I do, I catch a glimpse of a bright bluish light in a thin strip of wall polished to a high sheen. I move closer to it, then stop in shock at what I see. I have been transformed, but not into Flood.

A small silver ball is floating at human eye-level, looking back at me through the mirrored surface, its body inscribed with Forerunner symbols. I move left, and it mirrors my motion. I slide right. It copies me exactly. There is no trace of anything that looks remotely flesh-and-blood behind me. They did it. I am a monitor now, though I still remember what being human felt like. It is disorienting, but I no longer must fear infection. I will be eternally grateful to the Forerunners for this gift of life. I caused them nothing but trouble, but they, on faith, have given me a chance to spread what I know. A chill runs through me as I remember why they did this, and suddenly the empty halls have a more ominous meaning. I must find and warn someone.

"Monitor! Over here!" A voice hisses low. I spin around to find a female Forerunner, a Warrior-Servant of the kind I once fought, hiding behind a tall pillar. She beckons to me hastily, then ducks out of sight again, as though she does not want to be seen.

"Why are you hiding?" The question seems loud in the silence. She peers around the pillar and simply waves me closer again. I cautiously come over and am confronted by the business end of a boltshot. I back up.

"If you shout out like that again, I will shoot you. The things have damn good hearing, and if they hear either of us, they'll kill us. Get it?"

"What happened?" I have a sinking feeling I already know.

"Containment breach. One of the humans was carrying some sort of virus that transforms the infected into twisted beasts. The sick Forerunners got loose and they're all over now. Over a quarter of the population are transformed. They called us in to try to clean up, but our ship was damaged. Judging by the things' movements, they're heading for the spaceport."

Had I still been human, I would have slid down a wall in total despair at the news.

6. Outbreak

She does not notice my change in behavior at first. She is too busy looking for Flood forms that might be roaming the hallways, searching for potential new victims. But when she does turn back, she stiffens. I can sense her tension, probably because I can detect the subtle changes in her body chemistry.

"You know something, monitor. Tell me. What are those things out there, and where did they come from?"

Even if I hadn't wanted to give the answer, I have a feeling that the compulsion to give up the information on demand would have been unstoppable, and as I tell her the story I realize that this form is probably hard-wired to respond to Forerunner questions and orders. I am not my own commander after all, but rather a servant of those who converted me to this form. I am slightly uncomfortable with this. They could ask me anything and I would have to respond. This form makes me highly susceptible to interrogation. What if they ask me of the Primordial on Charum Haakor, highly classified information? Even I only know where and what it is and that we have questioned it before, with disastrous results. I do not know what was said, but what if the Forerunners attempt communication with it as well? What would they do with that knowledge? _Not important right now, _I tell myself. _Get out of here first, and then worry about it. _I finish my tale and wait for a response. The Promethean before me seems quite shocked to hear it.

"How do you know all this?" The Warrior-Servant asks.

"I was once a human. I was part of a crew that your kind defeated."

She recoils from me. "This is a sin against the Mantle! Who has allowed this, and why?"

"A Lifeworker did this. I told him my story, and he thought the information was important enough to save me. He has likely fallen victim to the Shaping Sickness that claimed my original body. I owe him my life. You would do well to respect his sacrifice."

"_You _did this. You brought this down upon all of us." Her voice is hard with rage and disgust. It she had her helmet off, I am sure her face would be twisted in a snarl, the stiff hairs on her neck standing up as if reflecting her indignation.

"It was an accident. I would not wish the Shaping Sickness on the worst of my enemies, not even upon the Didact himself."

"Do not foul his name. He is an honorable and immensely powerful warrior who has taught me all I know. He has given much to defend us against the onslaughts from the humans. Much indeed."

"Believe me, I know. We cannot afford to fight amongst ourselves any longer. If we wish to survive, we must leave this place."

"So tell me where to go."

"I don't know."

"You have no connection to the Domain?"

"Noâ€|"

She throws up her hands in exasperation. "Great. Trapped in a structure overrun with enemies that won't die and a talkative monitor who is worse than useless. If it weren't for the Mantle I am bound by the warrior's code to uphold, I would take the easy way out right now."

"I may not know much, but I know how to kill the Flood."

"Oh really? Because every time I try, they just pop back up again like a damn jack-in-the-box. You kill them once, walk by, and they get you from behind."

"You have to dismember the bodies. Cause enough damage that they cannot heal themselves. Those afflicted with the Shaping Sickness have a natural healing ability. You need to counteract that. Do you carry a sharp object with you?"

"Do I?" She scoffs and flexes the fingers of her left hand. A seven-inch hard-light blade springs from her wrist, and she waves it before me. "Big enough for you?"

"It will do."

"If your idea works, then I swear by the Mantle I will get you a connection to the Domain. I will even appealâ€|"

A shrieking howl cuts her off, and an answering cry echoes from the opposite direction. The sounds are tortured, like an animal in pain, but also hungry, lustful, and dangerous. I have heard sounds like these before, and hoped that I never would again.

"They've caught our scent. Run. Don't look back. We make for the nearest secure location."

7. Running from Nightfall

****Hello again! Thank you all for the positive feedback! What better way to celebrate MLK than with another chapter of my story? Enjoy and please do not hesitate to comment. Writers thrive on constructive criticism.****

She picks up her weapon, a compact yet lethal lightrifle, the favored weapon of the Promethean caste, and hefts it easily in one hand, a difficult feat even for a strong human.

"Follow me. I know this place better than an unconnected monitor. Keep up, though, or I will leave you behind."

She darts from behind the pillar, moving with the swift, fluid grace of all Warrior-Servants. I am careful to follow very closely, watching the hallway behind us for Combat forms, until I am distracted by a body lying on the floor. It is neither Forerunner nor human, though it wears Promethean armor. It is lying facedown on the floor, utterly still, which is a relief. Most of the body looks fairly normal, but one arm ends in a grotesque, fused mass of muscle

fiber and exposed skeleton that has forced the armor plates apart. Razor-sharp shards of bone protrude from the end of its hand-less appendage, discolored by a dark red substance.

"You killed this thing?" I ask, trying to keep my voice low.

"No. The warrior who did is dead." Her tone is flat.

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't know him. Save your apologies for when we aren't being hunted by ravenous beats with an incredible sense of hearing."

I take the hint and fall silent as she bends over the body.

"Don't touch it," I warn, alarmed at her proximity to the infected form. She makes no response, steeling herself for the task she must do, then drives her knife into the body, once, twice, then again and again. A sickening mixture of thickened blood and mucus oozes from the wounds she makes. I try to calculate internal damage, but even when the Flood-form is too damaged to heal itself, she continues to massacre the carcass. Horrified, I quite deliberately bump into her, knocking her backward. She stumbles, then looks at me, her features inscrutable beneath her reflective visor. At first I think she might shoot me, but I notice she is trembling from head to foot. I can tell that her heart is racing. She doesn't move from her position, standing over the corpse, gazing blankly at some point in space, gore dripping from her hard-light blade.

"It's okay," I tell her, trying to calm her. "Come on. We have to go." I push her, trying to move her away from the dead half-breed thing on the floor. She turns, picks up her rifle, holding it slackly. She raises the rifle to her shoulder, braces, and fires, continuing to macerate the body. The metallic report of the lightrifle echoes down the hallway.

"Stop!" I shout. "Stop! It's dead!" I smack her helmet, and her head snaps around to focus on me.

"It's dead. Save your ammo." I repeat, pleading with her to see reason. She is obviously traumatized. She saw something that she's not telling me, and unless she snaps out of it, she could endanger both of us. For the very first time in my existence I feel pity for a Forerunner. Loss and trauma I have both experienced, but always I have had time to recover, unlike this Warrior-Servant, whose name I still do not know. The irony of my situation is not lost on me. Not long ago, I would do anything I could to stop them, and now here I am, trying to save one, to help one.

The weapon clatters to the deck from her slack grip, even as my ears, or auditory-sensors as it were, pick up an animalistic howl. It sounds nearer this time. The Flood are closing in. We have to move.

"Promethean, pick up your weapon! We have to get out of here!" My desperate tone has no effect on her stupor. Another cry reverberates down the hallway. The sound is aggressive, chilling, hungry, like a wild dog. She looks up finally, startled, then reaches down and grabs her weapon off the floor. She takes two steps backward, turns and breaks into a run. I follow again, not sure if it's a good idea

anymore. She has shown herself to be unstable and must receive help. She needs to get back to her fleet.

She darts behind a column and waves me in close. When she's sure I'm listening, she says, in barely a whisper,

"There's a terminal up ahead. I can connect you to the Domain from there, but I need you to buy me some time. Distract them. Your shielding will hold off their fire for a short time, and they're terribly inaccurate. You should be fine. But if they try to get at me, they will rip the door down. I've seen it happen before. Your odds are better than mine, and you don't know how to work the terminals."

The heavy scrape of feet is heard above us. We both look up, uneasy.

"All right. You'll get your distraction. Just hurry. They're close."

She nods sharply and takes off, leaving me alone in the dark, creepy silence. The scraping sound is getting closer, and along with that comes a whining, like an injured dog, soft and low. Never having heard this sound from a Flood form before, I move cautiously forward. My light catches a creature in its beam, a twisted monster wearing mangled Forerunner armor. The whining stops and I freeze in fear as the Flood looks up at me. The creature's head is bare, its mouth distorted, drooling slime, its eyes covered in thick skin. This form is blind, but that does not stop it. It can still hear me. It snarls like a rabid wolf, tenses its body, and leaps.

8. Connection

****Finally! new Chapters! haven't abandoned this, just having trouble. Feedback always helps!****

Its long, extruded claws scratch at my shields, causing the corona of energy around me to become visible for an instant. I jerk away, out of reach, but the powerful blow knocks me off-balance. Below me, the Flood snarls, snapping yellowed teeth like needles. I spin circles around the alien-zombie's head as it follows my movements, buzzing about like a fly that it's just longing to swat. I have this one distracted, infuriated for now, but I can already hear the sounds of others, the characteristic clunk-scape of a walking Flood-form. And slowly they drag themselves from the shadows, one at a time, each as horrible as the last. Their apparent clumsiness is only an illusion perpetuated by the monsters so that they may easily fool and catch their prey. I am not fooled by this. I know how they move, seen the terrifying agility these monsters display while hunting.

The horde below growls and snarls like the single hive-mind they are, one pulsating mass of mutated flesh, powerful and hungry, always hungry. Some totter on uneven, twisted legs, others wave elongated arms that appear thin enough to break. All are different, like their less twisted counterparts, and yet they are all part of a single seething mass, like a many-headed hydra. And they are each as lethal as their brother, even without weapons. But of course they do have weapons, and they know how to use them, if not very well. Fortunately none of them bear Incineration Cannons, the huge red-and-black

artillery pieces favored by Forerunner Juggernauts. Those weapons are so devastating that you barely have to aim, and they rip a man in half, armor and all, in one shot. Instead I see lightrifles, boltshots, and Suppressor-class assault weapons. One of them even carries a Class-A Binary Wave rifle, the Prometheans' sniper weapon. The Flood-beast holding it will not know how to aim it properly, but if I can get such a weapon to my Forerunner charge, then it may be of some use to her. Before I can think of how to do so, though, they open up with their weapons, and I am engulfed in a storm of energy beams.

Laser bolts spatter the metal around me in a wide, clumsy arc, most clean misses, some near misses, and some hits. Luckily the one with the binary rifle missed me, but my shield levels have dropped. They may be careless with their weaponry, but the storm of bolts is so thick and so wide it's impossible to dodge. I jink left and right, managing to avoid major damage, but I have to get out of this situation, and soon, else my shields will fail and I will die for a second and last time. But they have me boxed in, the Promethean is not yet finished with her business, and the escape routes have been cut off by the Flood. I could escape and leave her, but that would be traitorous and despicable. She has risked much to try to save us, and we need each other for survival, whether we like it or not. Still, her efforts will come to nothing ifâ€¦|.

Accessing the Domain.

A floodgate opens. Images and sensations pour in on me, an unrestricted deluge of information, of _memories._ _This_ is the Domain, the library of all Forerunner information, a shockingly vast and marvelously rich store of wonderful data. It isn't a jumbled mess, though, not random tidbits, not like a flashback to an arbitrary point in life, but a cool sense of openness, of connection, of _belonging._ It isn't distracting at all, but instead is enlightening. I carry the memories of hundreds of thousands of Forerunners now as well as my own, and a thrill of excitement runs through me as I immediately draw on that knowledge, focusing on the Flood below me, analyzing them through new eyes, combining thousands of years' experience from Prometheans and my own encounters with the Flood.

The more I look, though, the more I realize running is the only option. There are simply too many for one Promethean to handle. My shields spark again as the Flood unleash another volley. I look around for my Forerunner ally, then do a scan for uninfected life-forms. I detect one-she's on the move, to the left of a branching hallway. _That wasn't there before. _She must have opened a door from the Cartographer. _Hm. The Cartographerâ€¦|Not a human term. It must be like a terminalâ€¦|made for navigation. I flee the wall of monsters, even as I ponder this. I'm quick, able to escape them for the moment, but they are right behind, and their groans follow me through the halls, their shots going wide of my monitor's body.

I pull away, out of reach, soaring nearly up to the ceiling, where I lose them in the shadows. Yet the shambling mob below does not disperse. I can tell they are hot on the trail of the one I, too, pursue. Their armor glints dully in what's left of the sourceless illumination, orange-yellow flashes denoting the lines in the weapons below. They run on, seemingly tireless, following a trail I cannot. She's close, but not in the hallway, that much I know. Yet the

monsters do not suspect, and I stay hidden in the darkness, waiting until all is still and silent once more.

End
file.